

Appleby Archaeology Group April 2006

Many visitors joined Appleby Archaeology group for the last talk of the season, when Tom Clare, Senior Lecturer in Environmental Archaeology at Liverpool John Moore's University and former county archaeologist for Cumbria, spoke on *Recent Investigations at Long Meg*.

The first known record of Long Meg and her Daughters was made by John Aubrey, the seventeenth century antiquarian, and the first detailed diagrams showing a path through the circle and a now vanished second smaller circle were drawn by William Stukley in the early 1800s. In the second half of the nineteenth century carvings were identified on Long Meg.

Long Meg and her Daughters is one of the largest stone circles in Britain and the second largest to have banks and ditches within the circle as found at Stanton Drew in the Mendips. No remains have been found inside the stones and one idea is that it was a trading post for stone axes, another that it was an astronomical site and today with the interest in neo paganism cards depicting Long Meg can be bought to mark the winter solstice. Mr Clare said that recent findings are suggesting new ideas for the context of the circle.

He continued by describing some of the features of the monument, the carvings, the structures and landscape and by drawing comparisons to other sites.

Stan Beckinsal and others have found more carvings. Some on the monolith, Long Meg, are very low down, which may indicate that they were carved before the stone was placed in its present position. Carvings have now been identified on other stones in the circle. The rock art takes the form of spirals and concentric rings similar to some found in the Boyne Valley. The only other monuments in Cumbria with similar markings lie within a mile of each other at Little Meg and Glasonby Circle. Portal stones, which mark entrances, are seen in a number of monuments such as tombs but are not common in stone circles. At Long Meg there is a double set, now fallen, at the south west entrance. Similar portals are seen at Stanton Drew in the Mendips.

Long Meg is separate from the circle but appears to stand within a complex set of monuments. In the 1970s Aubrey Bell noted that there was a bank associated with the circle. Clare has since discovered that the bank is more extensive and further surveying has shown that it predates the narrow ridges and furrows that can be detected within the circle. The monument is not set on the

hill top but is built into the landscape with the contours changing direction inside the circle. Aerial photography in the 1980s revealed a ditched enclosure around the present day farm buildings which abuts the circle and probably predates it. The entrance to the enclosure is associated with a spring. Identified at the same time were a number of enclosures and ditches in the surrounding landscape some of which are probably prehistoric. Two parallel ditches running east to west raise the question whether this was an avenue or cursus. Similar complex prehistoric landscapes are seen elsewhere for example at Stanton Drew and Rudstone in North Yorkshire. No evidence was found of the smaller circle that Stuckley drew or of any timber structures predating the stone circle as were found at Durrington Wells in Avon.. Mr Clare emphasised that over the centuries monuments will have been destroyed and that much of the prehistoric landscape remains buried.

Mr Clare said that in the early Bronze Age the landscape was woodland and that some of the alignments considered important today, for example to Little Meg, would not have been visible and he then put forward the idea that the monument was placed on the site because of the nearby spring and river. The ditched enclosure goes around a valley and the stone circle appears to enclose the head of that valley whose steep sides drop down to the river Eden at its narrowest point where a natural cataract forms. The cliffs of the valley are sandstone with an outcrop of gypsum appearing white against the sandstone. He suggested that this would have been a focal point in the landscape and in the valley and that both were significant to our ancestors. Similar associations with water are seen at other prehistoric landscapes including Stonehenge and Durrington Wells in Avon.

He concluded by returning to the stones themselves. Evidence from stones that had been buried suggest that these monuments would have been colourful and may even have been painted with gypsum. It may be that the colour, shapes ,size, texture and relationship of the stones were meaningful and important. More detailed study is needed. Many of the stones are rounded erratics and in the future, it is hoped that petrologic analysis will tell us where the stones came from and whether Long Meg was carved from the nearby cliffs.

A number of questions were taken before the speaker was warmly thanked for a thought provoking and very interesting talk,

The summer activities of the group start with a walk to Oddendale on Thursday May 18th at 7pm for details contact Martin Tel 01768361131.

